

Totem (Book 1: Scars)

by C Michael Lorion

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Dedication

This book, and the past three years (yes, three!), are dedicated to my wife, Rebecca. No one else believed in me as deeply as she did, sacrificed as much as she did, nor will enjoy the fruit of our labor as totally as she will. Rebecca, my wife, my lover, and my friend, this first one's for you.

PS. Let's.

Acknowledgments

I wrote this story mostly in solitude while listening to music through my headphones to shut out any distractions. That does not mean I wrote this story in a vacuum. Many people have contributed to this story in one way or another, some of them in many ways, some of them unknowingly. This is where I get to (finally!) thank them.

At the end of the book, I've listed a handful of authors and their works that have influenced my writing in numerous ways.

First, my Beta Readers who sacrificed time and energy reading early manuscripts and offering valuable feedback: **Randy Harris, Ken Knowlton, Matthew** and **Lisa Brouillet, Shawn Lorion** (yes, he is my brother), and **Rebecca Lorion** (my wife). Thanks, guys. I owe you! Still up for the Ale House? It's on me!

Shawn: What a life it's been so far, eh bro? Look where we've been, how far we've come, and where we are now. I only wish we lived closer so our beautiful families could enjoy each other a lot more often. Good thing we have eternity.

Randy: A truer friend I've never had. Our times together, though not as frequent as we'd both like, always feel so comfortable, so easy, so...right. Like it couldn't be any other way. Know what I mean? Yeah, I know you do.

Uncle Ken and **Aunt Betty:** There was a time, back in the day, when your home was like a home-away-from-home for me, even though I lived only five minutes away. Thanks for sharing everything—your books, your music, your pool, your house, and, most importantly, your lives. You have greatly enriched my life, not only as my uncle and aunt, but as my friends.

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My family: **Rebecca**, I love you. We did it! **Kyle, Seth, Sydney, Kaeden, Roman, Judah,** and **Micah**, there's a scene in the movie Mrs. Doubtfire where Daniel (played by Robin Williams) is fighting for joint custody of his children. He pleads his case before the judge, stating that he's addicted to his children. Ditto for me. I can't imagine what it would have been like the past five or so years if I'd had a regular nine-to-five job, how much of your lives I would've missed. I am blessed in so many ways having you all in my life. I love you!!!

Joe: Thanks for bringing us ice fishing, hunting, and all the other outdoorsy things we did as a family. I may not have been too much into it at the time, but the experience sure came in handy in writing this story. Oh, and thanks for bringing the grandkids to the fishing derbies. Now, we need to get 'em on the ice!

And last, but certainly not least, **Mom**: I think I owe, among so many other things, my love of reading to you. Remember when the Gardner Library was in that building on Connors Street, before it moved to the supermarket building? You would bring me and Shawn there, usually returning books late if I remember correctly. I remember getting Dr. Suess and Sesame Street (there's a monster at the end of this book!) and Richard Scary books. That must have been when it all started, my love affair with books, so for that Mom, I am eternally grateful. But more than that, you have been the singular constant in my life. For that, thank you just does not seem like enough, but it's all I've got for now. So...thank you, and I love you.

Prologue: May 26, 1637

He tried to shut out the cries and screams of his people. His heart beat inside his chest, pounding against his ribs as if it wanted to escape. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. The stone arrowhead slipped in his hand and cut his finger. Blood oozed from the wound and dripped onto her cheek. She did not cry. She did not whimper. She looked him directly in the eye. She was stronger than he was. He'd known that for a long time, but until now he hadn't been aware how much stronger.

"My son. Finish what I have commanded."

He glanced over his shoulder to the source of the voice. He could throw the arrowhead with enough force to pierce the heart of the one who spoke. Maybe that would free his own heart. But...he could not do that. He knew it, and so did the one who had spoken. He had no choice in the matter.

Smoke from the fires outside seeped in through the cracks. The stench of burned flesh stung his eyes.

"It must be done. She must learn the lesson."

He looked down at the girl's face. She was beautiful. He looked at the young man lying face down on the ground with the tomahawk lodged in his back. He could not blame the young man for noticing the girl's beauty and acting on the impulses he must have felt coursing through his body. He would not blame any man. For she was beautiful, more than any girl he had ever seen. But that did not mean that things could be done that violated his tribe. There must be retribution.

He only wished it didn't have to be him that had to carry it out.

"My son...."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He gripped the arrowhead tighter and lowered it so that its point made contact with her skin above her left eye.

Flames ate through the wall, heat searing his flesh, smoke burning his eyes.

He made the cut.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1978

Chapter 1: Kimi Enters the New World

Kimi made the unfortunate decision of taking a flying leap out of The Passage without thinking ahead. She paid the price for her short-sightedness. Overshooting her projected arrival spot, Kimi found herself hurtling toward a massive boulder. She extended her arms to soften the blow, which ended up not softening anything. Instead, her left wrist crunched as the momentum of her body mashed it into the boulder. Pain shot through her arm. She also rolled an ankle. More pain, this time up her right leg. Clutching her wrist to her chest and turning to lean against the boulder, Kimi slid to the snow-covered ground. The deerskin-covering she wore prevented her back from scraping against the cold, rough surface of the massive rock. She closed her eye and willed her body to breath slower. After a few moments, it obeyed her. She then listened. Except for the leafless, snow-covered branches creaking in the breeze, Kimi heard nothing.

Crouching against the boulder, Kimi straightened her arm and tried moving her wrist. Another unfortunate decision on her part. Pain flared in her wrist. The Elders—the ones who had sided with her—had warned her to be careful, to step through The Passage. She should have heeded their words. Her father’s voice echoed in her spirit. *Experience—the fathomless reservoir of life’s wisdom.* Next time, she would remember.

Kimi leaned against the boulder, put all her weight onto her good ankle, and pushed herself up. She surveyed her surroundings and thanked The Great Spirit that she recognized where she was. To her right, a depression in the snow indicated the cart road that led from the summit of the mountain to its base. To her left, the forestry tower. She breathed a sigh when she saw these things. They told her she was where she needed to be, which was in the clearing at the two-thousand foot summit of Wachusett Mountain. Others in the past had found themselves in much different places other than their intended destinations of arrival. A few had ended up not only in different places, but in different dimensions. Those had been the most unfortunate few.

Looking to the gray sky, Kimi offered up her gratitude. *Thank you, Great Spirit, for your guidance. Thank you for your protection.*

She tried moving her wrist again. She felt bone grate against bone. The pain brought a tear to her eye. At least one broken bone, maybe more. She fought back the tears, willing herself to not break down. She needed to be strong. She inhaled, lifted her leg, and rotated her foot. It fared better than her wrist. It hurt, but the pain was manageable. More importantly, she could move it. She needed mobility right now, and she had it. She would have been in desperate trouble if she was unable to walk. Not that she wasn’t desperate as it was already. Having arrived late, and now having to favor her wrist, she was at a distinct disadvantage.

She would have to trust The Great Spirit that when she found Achak she would be physically capable of doing what would be necessary. She needed to be prepared mentally as well, for when that time came, Kimi was not at all certain she would be capable of carrying out the task charged to her by the Elders.

Satisfied with the condition of her foot, tucking her wrist in close to her stomach, Kimi stepped away from the boulder. Everything started spinning and swirling and tilting. The white snow and the black trees and the gray clouds whirled about her, spinning faster, swirling wilder,

tilting farther. Her insides protested. She pin-wheeled her arms trying to stay balanced and, in the process, smacked her broken wrist against the boulder. Kimi screamed as fire flared up her arm. Like one of the older men in her tribe that had had too much time on the so-called peace pipe, Kimi staggered away from the boulder and tripped over a rock buried under the snow. Reflexively, she drew her wrist in close to her body and shifted her weight to her left foot, trying to avoid more pain.

It didn't work.

She fell onto a foot of hard-packed snow. The rough edges of the crusty snow scraped her deerskin-covered shoulder and her face, drawing blood from her right cheek. As painful as that was, it could have been worse. At least she had been able to protect her wrist. She rolled onto her back, wincing at the pain in her wrist and ankle and shoulder. Pushing herself to a sitting position, shrugging as much of the snow off as she could with minimal movement to protect her wrist, Kimi checked her shoulder. The deerskin covering the Elders had given her had not torn, which was a good thing. The covering would keep her warm and dry for now, as long as it was intact, but a few more falls to the ground like that and eventually it would rip. Given how cold it was, she couldn't let that happen.

Taking a deep breath, Kimi pushed off from the snow with her right hand and, shifting her weight to her left foot, she stood. She steadied herself against the boulder with her good hand. Cradling her wrist, she raised her head to the sky and prayed to The Great Spirit, again seeking strength, guidance, and courage.

After waiting to make sure the vertigo did not return, Kimi stepped away from the boulder and surveyed the area once again, looking for footprints that would tell her which way to go to find Achak. But there were no footprints. There were animal tracks—deer and coyote and rabbit and bear—but nothing else to indicate that Achak had been this way.

But, that was impossible.

Kimi turned and tilted her head. She squinted, searching for the tell-tale shimmering of the air. There it was. The Passage was still open. There were no tracks in the snow near it except for hers, which picked up a few feet from the opening. But Achak had come through right before Kimi had. She had seen him enter The Passage, and yet, there was no evidence here that he had come out of it. But that, too, was impossible. Once inside, there was no other way to go except out the other end. That meant Achak was here. Kimi could not understand the lack of footprints, but she knew he was here. He had to be.

Confused, Kimi tried to think of an explanation. Coming up with nothing, she raised her hand to her cheek and rubbed the raw, bloody skin. She ran her fingers up to her temple, across her forehead, and let them caress the scar that encircled her empty eye socket. She fingered the emptiness. Where there was once a beautiful, deep-brown eye, there was dead tissue. She would not cry. No. She had not cried then nor since, and neither would she now. There was no time for that.

She raised her head toward the sky, hoping for a sign from The Great Spirit that would tell her it would be all right, that everything would turn out for the good, that she would one day be made whole again and be accepted back into her people. She had lost so much in her eighteen years. Had it been eighteen years, or had it been longer. An eternity? There were times when the guilt, and the shame, and the loneliness drove her to wish that it all would...

...end.

Kimi lowered her head. She knew that even if The Great Spirit granted everything back to her, including her full eyesight and complete acceptance by her people, none of it would matter

because it wouldn't bring back her father. He was the one who had paid the ultimate penalty and given the supreme sacrifice for Kimi's singular act of disobedience.

As for her mother....

Enough feeling sorry for herself. That would accomplish nothing. She had to find the Totem and stop Achak. Preferably, in that order. Given that there were no footprints to follow, finding Achak was going to be more challenging than Kimi had anticipated. Finding the Totem.... How was she supposed to find something she had never seen and never been told what it looked like? Before being banished from her people, she had heard the stories about the Totem—most of which were, no doubt, more legend than fact—but no one had ever learned for certain its true identity. Some said it was in the form of a wooden image of an animal, some a grave marker of a noble warrior, still others the skin of a bear or wolf. Any of these forms, and countless others, were suitable for holding the power of the tribal spirits. Any of them could serve as the Totem.

Kimi stood straight. She lowered her head and closed her eye. She prayed to The Great Spirit. She waited. Minutes passed. No voice. No vision. Nothing. She raised her head and opened her eye. She was on her own. No. That was not true. She felt as though she was on her own, but she knew that feelings most often were deceiving. This was simply the way it was between her and The Great Spirit. It was as elemental to her life as air was to breathing. Stories had been passed down through the generations of ancestors who had heard directly from The Great Spirit, or had been visited by a Vision, or had been given a Revelation by other means, all of which served to guide them in their lives. She'd even heard rumors of Achak being given a sign after spending an entire night offering up petitions.

No matter how long they were, or what form they took, Kimi's petitions had never once been answered with any sign or vision or voice. Still, she continued seeking The Great Spirit's guidance, always knowing that her petitions did not go unheard, always believing that The Great Spirit was there, guiding and sustaining her. She had no other choice but to be sure of that much.

Kimi looked to the east. She would go in that direction for no other reason than it would bring her closer to the rising sun, which, for now, was hidden by the gray clouds speeding across the sky. Perhaps heading east, The Great Spirit willing, would draw her closer to Achak.

Closer to her twin brother.

Chapter 2: Josh, Achilles, and the Girls

Josh Schofield swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He slapped his feet onto the cold hard wood floor and cursed his old man for skimping on the heating oil. It was February, the energy crisis was long gone, and still the guy couldn't find it within his stone-cold heart to splurge a little on some friggin' heat. They owned three cars and a boat, lived in a beautiful house, and the guy was afraid to spend money on heat? How messed up was that. Running a hand through his dark, curly hair, squinting in the direction of the green glow that silhouetted the tiny alarm clock hands on the bureau, Josh cursed again. 6:30. A full half-hour before his alarm was set to go off. He yawned, thought about crawling back under the covers, but decided against it. *What the hell*, he thought. *What's another half hour of sleep.*

So Josh sat on the edge of the bed wearing nothing but his Fruit of the Looms. Yeah, it was the middle of winter, he had to sleep with twenty layers of sheets and blankets and quilts, but Josh was a sleep-in-his-skiivies kind of guy. Always had been, always will be. Take your clothes off at night, hop into bed, wake up in the morning, change tighty-whities, throw on some clothes, and you were good to go. No time wasted fiddling with pajamas and all that crap.

Rubbing the crusties from his eyes, Josh remembered what day it was: Abby's sixteenth birthday.

"Damn."

He had let Abby talk him into driving her to Albany. As in Albany, New York. As in what the hell had he been thinking? *Sure, Abby. I'll drive you to Albany. What? Oh, to visit your mother's grave? Sure, no problem. Sounds like a reasonable request. Dead of winter? No problema, mi dear muchacha. Albany, here we come!* As smart as Abby was—and she was smart, certainly the smartest girl (not to mention perhaps the smartest person) he knew—she often came up with half-baked ideas. Like the time she tried training herself to run backward as fast as she could run forward just in case she ever needed to run backward. Or when she was on the kick of memorizing poems and then switching the lines and stanzas and forming new poems in her head which she would then memorize. Or when she attempted to write a 2,000 word short-story without the letter 't.' She had always admitted that those ideas were lame-brained, things to do just for the fun of it, and she even seemed to glow in the laughs they generated from all her friends.

But not this time. This was not another foolish stunt of hers. She truly believed there was something to gain by visiting her mother's grave all the way in Albany. Maybe there was, but Josh couldn't help but wonder if Abby was still angry at him for breaking up with her and this was her weird way of getting back at him. She could be stubborn—and lately, quite spiteful—so it certainly wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Abby was dead set in her determination to get to Albany, and she seemed convinced that it was a legit idea and how dare he question her on it.

In spite of the well-known fact that Josh loved driving, he wasn't exactly gung-ho about hopping into The Beast for a road trip to eastern New York. In the winter. On the first day of school vacation. He should be working at the Ray's Music Emporium today to earn an extra few bucks to sock away for the summer concert frenzy. But, he figured what the hell, maybe he owed

it to Abby seeing how he hadn't given her an honest explanation of why he broke it off with her. Maybe today he would even tell her the truth. Or some of it. Maybe. At the very least they could try to enjoy being together as they once had. Hell, it was worth a shot, seeing how they'd been friends since elementary school.

Josh stood, stretched all the muscles that needed to be stretched, and scratched all the appropriate places that needed to be scratched (along with a few inappropriate places as well). He strolled to the bureau with the cocky confidence that only an American eighteen-year-old high school senior, varsity football and basketball captain could wearing nothing more than his Fruities, and still retain every ounce of dignity.

He switched on the lamp and opened a couple drawers. Tucking the clothes under his arm, Josh took another stroll across the room to the console stereo sprawled against the opposite wall. He flipped through the vinyl stacked on one end of the music-spewing behemoth: Styx, Kansas, Skynyrd, Nugent, Heart, Boston, one from a new band called Foreigner that he hadn't opened yet, and KISS among others. He found the one he wanted. He lifted the turntable lid, slid the vinyl out from the protective cover, and fed it into the machine's hungry mouth. Josh lowered the needle onto the record with the care and precision of a surgeon performing open-heart surgery. He twisted the volume knob up to nine, thought better about blowing out his speakers, and dropped it down a couple notches. The mammoth Pioneer speakers on each side of the console hissed and crackled and popped with the noisy silence of dead air.

The deceptively innocent guitar notes drifted out of the speakers and filled his room. Rather than follow his routine of singing and air-guitaring like he was channeling the spirits of both Robert Plant and Jimmy Page, Josh did nothing. He opted instead to listen to Page lead the musical charge as Plant, John Bonham, and John Paul Jones followed him into the deep recesses of the ten-minute epic "Achilles Last Stand." Contrary to what everyone else in the universe believed, *Presence* was Zep's finest album. By far. Yeah, sure, all their albums were great, he wouldn't argue that point. But *Presence*? Come on. This album was what rock was all about. None of their other stuff even came close to the guitar-driven odyssey of "Achilles Last Stand," the funk-rock groove of "Nobody's Fault but Mine," or their most underrated song, "Hots on for Nowhere."

And speaking of hots. The Led Zeppelin album cover still in hand, clothes still under his arm, Josh's eyes drifted up the wall where they settled on a most pleasant sight—the two hottest babes who ever walked the face of planet Earth: Farrah Fawcett-Majors and Cheryl Tiegs. Two immortal beauties pinned side-by-side. Israel had the Wailing Wall, Germany the Berlin Wall, and China the Great Wall of...well, China. Good for them. Josh had his own wall—the Wall of Lustful Attractions. The old man could call it the Wall of Lustful Delusions all he wanted. Truth be told, Josh wondered why the old man had let him hang the posters in the first place. But he had, and who was Josh to argue with the great one's parental authority. The old man probably stole a peek every once in a while when Josh wasn't home.

Farrah in the red one-piece with the golden tan, flashing that delicious smile that was enough to make every guy in America from sea to shining sea blow a head gasket. Next to her was Cheryl who—in Josh's most humble opinion—had the goods on Farrah. Farrah was hot, no question about that. But Cheryl? Man! There was something about her goods that put everyone else to shame. She had it all. The girl-next-door smile, eyes that could melt a New England snowman in February, windblown hair that Josh's fingers could get lost in, the belly button that screamed sexy and cute and come get me, even the way she wore that skimpy purple bikini—or whatever color it was, but, then again, who really cared, right? And the killer, the thing that

really revved Josh's motor, was Cheryl's right thumb hooked under the string of her bikini bottom, teasing Josh with the unreal, illogical, yet eternally hopeful possibility of a private peek right there in his own bedroom. Man, oh man.

Yeah, there was Farrah and Jaclyn Smith and Suzanne Somers and that chick whose name he could never remember, the one who was in that movie *The Deep* and wore the white wet shirt in the boat (what a great piece of movie directing *that* was!). Most of the guys he knew would choose one of them over Cheryl. Not Josh. He'd take Cheryl any day of the week and twice on Sundays. Given the chance he'd even—

THUMP, THUMP!

Josh jumped at the banging on his door. His clothes dropped to the floor. The framed, autographed Dr. J poster that hung over his bed rattled against the wall.

"Turn that crap down!" Like a cold shower, the voice of He-Who-Hated-Good-Music cooled Josh a good fifteen degrees. For the sheer pleasure of it, Josh hesitated before obeying the Great One's command.

"Wait for it," Josh whispered to no one. After a moment, he snapped his fingers and pointed at the door.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

"I said—"

"I got it, I got it!" Josh reached into the console. "Don't have a coronary." He cranked the volume up to ten, waited a second, then dropped it to five, which was still loud, but not loud enough to send He-Who-Has-Sensitive-Ears into another door-pounding tantrum.

Dropping the *Presence* album cover onto the stack of vinyl, Josh realized he risked the major embarrassment of his mother barging in (again!) while he stood there in only his tighty-whities. He snatched up his clothes from the floor. You'd think that at eighteen, graduating from high school in less than four months, in possession of his driver's license, old enough to be drafted into the armed forces of the U S of A, and legally eligible to vote in the next presidential election (not that he would) that a guy wouldn't have to worry about his mother crashing in on his private party. Wasn't there a constitutional right to privacy? Josh couldn't recall learning in history class about a mother's amendment that exempted them from that. Unless that had been covered in one of the numerous classes he'd slept through during the past year-and-a-half.

As John Bonham's staccato drum beat drove "Achilles" to its inevitable conclusion, Josh got dressed in the usual: jeans, concert T-shirt (the chosen band of the day? Foghat!), sneakers (Snow? Who cares.), and leather belt with the massive, statement-making belt buckle with one word emblazoned in blood-red lettering set against a black background surrounded by a brushed-silver edge. One word that said everything there was to say about anything—KISS.

With the lightning bolt S's firmly fixed to his waist like the 'S' on Superman's chest, Josh was ready for the day. Ready for the load of crap his old man would heap on him and for Abby and her half-baked road trip to Albany.

Abby. He pictured her in his mind, the way she had looked when he'd first truly took notice of her. Not when he'd met her on the first day of first grade in Miss Quimbly's class, nor when he'd first talked to her on the last day of school before Christmas vacation in Mrs. Bolton's third-grade class, when she'd given him a Christmas card. And not on any of the days following that when they'd become good friends and had hung out all the time.

No, Josh had not *noticed* Abby on any of those days. That day had come on the first day of school a couple years ago when he'd entered his junior year of high school and she her freshman. *That* was the day Josh noticed Abby Lynne Graham. Something magical happened over summer

that year that transformed all the awkward junior high girls into glowingly robust young women (that may be stating the case too strongly, but at least you get the picture).

That was the day Josh noticed Abby: wavy, often out-of-control—she would say free-spirited—fiery hair; freckles that hibernated during the winter and awoke in time for summer; svelte yet athletic runner's body that exhibited both strength and grace when she ran. On that day, Josh had seen a girl that had been given a new body over the summer, and that girl had seemed to enjoy that body as much as a gazelle leaping and shifting through the African savanna.

And it had not been only the body Josh had noticed. No sir. It was her personality, too. Yes, Josh *did* care about such things. Her exuberance for life completed the entire package for him. She had developed the uncanny ability to make a person feel at home in her presence, as if she knew everything about you, the good and the bad and the ugly, and held none of it against you. Abby, over that summer leading into her freshman year, had transformed into quite the desirable young lass.

And now, more than two months since the breakup, all he could do was brood over all he had lost. Josh had ended it with Abby the day before Thanksgiving break. He had felt horrible doing it, but he also knew he had had no other choice at the time. Better to have caused her a little pain than to have prolonged the inevitable, causing tons more heartache later.

Sure it was better, he told himself. *Keep telling yourself that, you friggin' idiot.*

Before heading downstairs, Josh dug through the stack of vinyl again, looking for an album he had by-passed earlier. He pulled out *Destroyer*—the best KISS album ever recorded, no matter what anyone else had to say about it—and slipped it onto the spindle, readying it to drop when the Zeppelin album was done. He then left the bedroom, turned right, took five steps to his brother's room, and as was his custom every morning, rapped his knuckles on the door twice. There was no response. There had been no response yesterday. And there would be no response tomorrow morning when he would again rap twice on the door. Nor would there be a response the day after tomorrow. Josh could spend all eternity knocking and rapping and banging out a Peter Criss drum solo on his brother's door and there would be no response.

Never.

What a frightening word, he thought. *Never. NEVER. NEVER! How do I live with never? Never doesn't just mean for as long as I live. Never goes beyond my life. I could spend the next twenty years knocking on every friggin' door in the whole country, in the whole damn world, and there might be a response from the other side of every single one of those doors, but none of those responses would be from Julian.*

Never.

Josh lowered his hand and pulled it away from the door. He was tempted to knock once more, but decided not to break the ritual. Across the hall, the door to his parents' bedroom was closed, which more than likely meant they were both still in there. More than likely they were reheating the leftovers from last night's delightful smorgasbord of innuendos and accusations.

He wondered what mood the old man would be in this morning. Not that it mattered. He'd learned to cope with each one whenever it reared its ugly head. There was the nit-picky mood, the silent brooding mood, and the on-the-warpath mood. Door number one, door number two, or door number three? *Well, Monty, seeing how the old man has been on the warpath of late, let's go with door number three.*

Josh descended through the gauntlet of family photographs that plastered both walls of the stairway: first days of school, Little League team pictures, family reunions—Dad's side only, of course—Christmases and Thanksgivings and Halloweens, vacations and birthday parties. The

Kodachrome images were once joyous remembrances of good times. Now they served as mocking reminders of all that the Schofield family had lost in the past two years.

He purposefully did not look at the photograph that mocked him the loudest of all. That was the one of him and Julian sitting in *Pythagoras* on Lake Champlain. He didn't have to look at it. The image was scalded onto the cornea of his mind's eye so that whether his eyes were open or closed, whether he was awake or asleep, he lived with the photograph every minute of every day. His shrink said it was becoming a permanent part of his psyche, or something like that. As if the head doctor knew what really went on inside Josh's mind. Josh thought of it as the reverse of never. He would never get a response from the other side of Julian's door, and he would always have that image with him.

At the bottom of the stairs Josh turned the corner and entered the kitchen. Or, as he had once referred to it—only once, given the lecture he got from He-Who-Does-Not-Appreciate-Good-Sarcasm—The Great American Overpriced Kitchen Appliance Showroom. The old man had spent the past two years overhauling the room, replacing everything in it with newer, shinier, bulkier stuff. Every kitchen appliance, gadget, and utensil ever invented in the modern era was on display. He doubted any of it was any better than what they'd had before, but, then again, Josh didn't consider himself an expert on kitchen fixtures. From the industrial-sized, brushed-steel monster stove to the hulking refrigerator, from the oversized dish washer that was big enough to wash the old man's Caddy to the state-of-the-art trash compactor—which Josh thought was a total waste of legal tender, pun intended—from the two blenders to the two sinks (both with garbage disposals), the entire room screamed overkill.

Spending mucho dinero on high-end stereo equipment and muscle cars and other essentials that enhanced one's quality of life made all the sense in the world. What was the point of listening to AC/DC or The Motor City Madman or Zeppelin or (dare he even think it?) KISS on a cheap piece of crap record player. Or cruising around the back roads of Old Wachusett in a beat-up Ford Pinto deathtrap. There was no point. Common sense. But kitchen appliances? Come on. How big does a stove or fridge have to be to cook up scrambled eggs or keep the milk from spoiling? And it wasn't just the appliances. The old man had replaced all the Formica counter tops with custom-cut stone slabs. A mammoth island—complete with second sink, second stove, and built-in cutting block—stood like an inside linebacker in a zone defense guarding the middle of the kitchen, daring anyone to even think about juking his way around it for extra yardage. The tile floor *alone* probably cost more than most of his friends' cars.

Again, overkill.

The Great One was never satisfied. Why have just one sink and one stove when you could have two of each. Two hundred dollar fridge? Nah. Go for the six hundred dollar one. Chevy or Cadillac? No contest. The man no longer had any sense of what it meant to have enough. It wouldn't have surprised Josh to find out the old man had bought a second family that he had stashed away on a deserted island somewhere in the South Pacific, a better version of this one that he could visit every once in a while, one that he could go to when he finally got sick and tired enough of this inferior one.

Josh trekked across the expansive room, made it around the island/linebacker, and opened one of the food cabinets in the corner. He pulled out the big yellow box of Cheerios. He sat on one of the six leather-cushioned bar stools that surrounded the island like obedient worshippers at the sacrificial altar. He opened the box and shoveled a handful of the little o's into his mouth, paying no attention to the ones escaping between his fingers and fleeing along the square ceramic tiles. He was about to bellow out the Cheerio yodel just for the sheer pleasure of it, but

realized he was going to get enough guff from the old man about the music and he probably shouldn't push his luck. No overkill for Josh, thank you very much. Like that great squinty-eyed, clenched-teeth philosopher Harry Callahan once said, a man's got to know his limitations.

"Josh, honey." His mother's bubbling voice trickled down the stairway. "You left your music on."

Josh could hear Zeppelin jamming out "Royal Orleans" (why do the DJs never play that song?) all the way down in the kitchen, and his mother, as intelligent and commonsensical as she was, still felt the need to remind him that he left his music on. He loaded another handful of o's into his mouth, thought about getting up, or at the very least answering his mother, but instead reached for a third handful.

Staccato footsteps echoed down into the kitchen, emanating from the gauntlet. The sound revealed two useful tidbits of information. One, the great David Jacob Schofield was descending from on high. Two, Josh had made the right bet picking door number three. *Great*, he thought. *Excellent friggin' fantastic way to start the morning*. If Josh were a betting man, and he had to place odds on his chances of escaping the impending encounter unscathed, he'd put them at three to one, against.

Against his better judgment, Josh turned toward the footsteps.

David Jacob Schofield entered the kitchen. Dressed appropriately enough for a college mathematics professor—brown sport coat with blue elbow patches, light blue open-collared shirt, dark blue pants and casual shoes—there was nothing intimidating about David Jacob Schofield's appearance, nor in his medium height and build. But the art of intimidation, the way David Jacob Schofield practiced it, involved more than simple physical appearance. There were the two 'A' words: attitude and action. That's what David Jacob Schofield was all about. Show people the appropriate attitude (and by appropriate we mean whatever attitude that gets you what you want with no regard for the other person's feelings) and carry out the necessary action (and by necessary we mean employing whatever means it takes to achieve the desired goal).

Josh watched his father. The man strode across the room and leaned against the stove between the fridge and the sink. He ran a hand through his thick, wavy brown hair. He crossed his arms. Glared at Josh. Each movement, from the narrowing of the eyes to the arching of the left eyebrow, was carefully designed and executed for maximum effect.

Maybe the odds needed to be tweaked just a touch, say ten to one. Still against, of course.

Hoping against the odds to lighten the mood, knowing it would more than likely backfire on him, Josh employed his best Eddie Haskill imitation. "Good morning, Father." He followed it with a cheek-to-cheek smile and threw in a hearty, if not sincere, "How are you this morning?" before grabbing more Cheerios and stuffing them into his mouth.

Apparently, the old man did not appreciate the humor. A minute passed. Then another. Josh felt like a lab mouse in a maze, the mad scientist waiting to see if said mouse would find its way out or run headfirst into another dead end.

Another minute passed. Finally, his father spoke.

"If you continue to abuse that stereo system I bought for you by blasting that incessant screaming and screeching you *think* passes for music, no matter what time of day or night, I will heave it out your bedroom window. I'll take every album you own and I will donate them to your girlfriend's church for the next record burning rally and you will sit and watch the entire callow, cacophonous collection float up to the heavens in thick black smoke."

After Josh recovered from the word 'cacophonous'—he'd never even heard the word before it came out of the old man's mouth—three thoughts popped into his head. One, he could sell

tickets to everyone at Old Wachusett High School to come over and watch the old man get a hernia trying to lift Josh's Marantz up and out his bedroom window. Two, Abby's church had never done any of that crazy record burning stuff. The holy-rollers who met across town did that. Three, Josh could recall two different occasions when he had told the old man that he'd broken it off with Abby months ago. Obviously, those conversations about Josh's love life had left quite the lasting impression on the man.

His father opened the fridge, took out the bottle of orange juice, and reached for a glass in the wooden cabinet above the counter. Unlike most parents, Josh's father never tied up his mini-lectures with silly questions like, "Are you listening, young man?," "Do you understand me?," or "Got that?" It was understood that when David Jacob Schofield spoke you listened, you understood, and you got it. No questions asked, no response required.

Josh responded anyway. Why not? The odds were already stacked against him. "Okie dokie. I understand." He considered adding a "Sieg Heil" with raised arm and clicked heels, but choosing to prolong his life, he instead settled for a simple "Sir" for good measure and added effect.

The old man poured a glassful of juice, downed it in one gulp, rinsed the glass, dried it on the dish towel hanging from the rack under the cabinet, and returned the glass to its proper place in the cabinet. Leaning against the counter and crossing his arms, he turned his full attention to Josh. "Knock off the sarcasm."

Josh nodded. His heels involuntarily moved a fraction of an inch toward each other before he stopped himself. His father glowered at him, seemingly aware of what he was thinking. Josh shrugged, his palms turned out. "What?"

His father waited a moment before speaking. "I still hear it."

Hear what, Mein Fuhrer? By the time that thought had travelled from his brain along the synapses and nerve endings and arrived at his mouth, the words had changed to, "Oh, sorry." He swept the escaped Cheerios that lay dead on the counter into his hand, knelt to pick up their fallen comrades on the floor, opened one of the island's lower cabinet doors, and tossed the handful into the trash. He closed the Cheerios box and put it away. He felt his father's eyes drilling into the back of his head like a mental vampire sucking the thoughts out of his brain. "Guess I kinda forgot," Josh said, glancing at his father without looking him in the eye. Conventional wisdom said it was best not to look directly at a growling dog.

Bolting up the stairs two at a time, Josh narrowly missed crashing into his mother who had just come out of her bedroom. Dressed in a green knit sweater, black slacks and shoes, her dark hair cascading over her broad shoulders, looking twenty-nine rather than thirty-nine, Constance Schofield did not fit the bill of your typical small city New England public library director. Except, perhaps, for the paperback glued to her hand, index finger serving as temporary bookmark. Today it was one of Robert Ludlum's. If she hadn't been his mother, Josh probably would've considered Constance Schofield thing of a knockout. While not in the same vein as Farrah or Cheryl, his mother was more along the lines of Kate Jackson or even Jaclyn Smith. Good-looking, classy, funny, a touch of subdued hotness underlying it all. Sidestepping her, Josh quickly buried that last thought as far down into his psyche as he could, hoping the thought would never resurface no matter how much digging around he or anyone else would do inside his head in the near future.

"Good morning, honey." His mother winked at him as she passed, signaling Josh not to worry too much about his father, that he would get over it, even though they both knew that the past two years indicated otherwise. Josh offered her a genuinely affectionate smile.

At the bottom of the stairs, she looked up at Josh. “You said you wanted to bring a bag lunch to work today, so I made one for you. Turkey sandwich with pickles and tomatoes, an apple, and celery sticks. The bag is in the refrigerator, middle shelf on the door.” She turned the corner, said, “Oh,” caught herself with one hand on the doorframe, and poked her head up the stairway. “You’ll need a winter coat. It looks like it could snow today.” She disappeared around the corner before Josh even thought about thanking her for making lunch. A twinge of guilt nibbled at his conscience. *Nice going, he thought. As if she didn’t get enough grief from the old man, you can’t say a simple thank you? Way to be a real friggin’ jerk.*

Not only that, he had lied to her about working today. Yeah, he’d lied to his parents plenty of times in the past, but...it felt different lately. With his father being the way he’d been the past year, Josh had sensed a kind of camaraderie with his mother, which made lying to her seem so...wrong. He’d thank her later tonight, after he got back from his day trip to Albany. Hell, maybe he’d even tell her the truth about Albany. She might tell Abby’s father, but that wasn’t Josh’s problem. He and his mother needed to stick together.

The past two years had been difficult for all of them, and his mother seemed like the most well-adjusted of the three, but Josh sensed that was more an act that she put on than anything else. And if he kept thinking about it he’d start worrying about his mother and he had enough to dwell on today, so best to banish those thoughts now.

In his room he plucked his NOVA 40 headphones off the floor where they lay next to his bed. They were big mothers, looked more like giant earmuffs than headphones, and they delivered unbelievable sound. He plugged the cord into the stereo jack on the Marantz receiver, sat cross-legged on the floor with his back against the console, and listened to “God of Thunder.” When the song was done he got up and turned off the stereo. He unplugged the phones, laid them atop the stack of albums, and lowered the lid on the turntable. Standing in front of the stereo and looking up at his girls, Josh pondered his life for a few quite moments. Satisfied he had plumbed the depths of his emotions, he stepped into the hall.

Five rooms occupied the second floor of the Schofield house. His parents’ room was directly across from his own, down the hall was his mother’s book room, his father’s music room stood guard at the end of the hall, and Julian’s room was next to Josh’s. Josh turned right and took the few steps to his brother’s room. He stood in front of the door. On the other side, closed off from the rest of the world, was a place he both treasured and feared.

Reaching for the knob, he checked over his shoulder to make sure no one was coming up the stairs. Satisfied both his parents were still in the kitchen, he wrapped his fingers around the brass knob. It was cold. He hesitated. He turned the knob and nudged the door. It swung silently inward. He paused to think once more about what he was doing. He tilted his head toward the staircase and listened. No footsteps.

Josh stepped across the threshold and entered his brother’s room for the first time in months. For the first time since he’d been back from his stint in the looney bin.

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